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# WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

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"The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose." — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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# WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

If one were to judge by the claims of ministers, of ecclesiastical associations, denominational newspapers and reviews; if one were to judge from the creeds, — he would suppose that Christianity came suddenly and full-grown into the world; that it leaped from the thought of God as Minerva was fabled to have leaped, fully developed and in complete armor, from the forehead of Jupiter.

You would suppose that in the time of Jesus and his apostles the creed, the ceremony, the practice, the entire Christian system, were developed. You would suppose that it had been recognized that the world was in a special condition of loss, and that this plan of salvation, definitely and fully outlined, was suddenly revealed to men. And yet we are face to face with a curious fact if that be true.

The Church of Rome claims to be the only and original church, and regards the Greek Church and all Protestants as so absolutely astray as to have no right to the name of Christian; the Greek Church regards the Church of Rome and all Protestants as in a similar hopeless condition; while all the Protestant churches regard the Church of Rome and the Greek Church as departures from the primitive simplicity of Christianity, and as being mixed up with and overloaded by forms and ceremonies and doctrines which have been borrowed from pagan sources.

If there was a clear, a consistent, a definite revelation

of those things that are essential to Christianity at the very outset, is not this confusion and contradiction a little strange and hard to understand?

Let us inquire, then, for a little, as to what are the facts, the historic facts, the facts which are not questioned by anybody who is simply looking to find what is true.

We shall discover, then, that Christianity is in line with evolution, is an illustration of evolution. Instead of its coming into the world fully developed, full-grown, we shall recognize the fact that a seed was planted, and that it grew year after year, century after century, gathering material on every hand from pagan and Christian sources, and that, instead of its having reached a fixed and final form during the first century, or the fifth or the tenth or the eighteenth, it has never reached a fixed and final form, never will reach it, never can reach it, in the nature of things. For everything in this universe is undergoing either one of two processes: it is growing, or it is decaying. And in either case it is not standing still; it is changing.

In spite, however, of these obvious facts and principles, you will find the most extravagant claims made in certain directions.

For example, the Roman Catholic Church says that it believes that which has always been believed by all men everywhere. So it claims to be catholic, or general, or universal in its belief. All Protestants make a similar claim, so far as the completeness and finality of revelation are concerned. The Rev. Dr. Richard S. Storrs, the famous Congregationalist preacher of Brooklyn, is reported to have said, not many years ago, that the idea of progress in theology was absurd, — meaning, of course, that since, as he believes, it had been completely and finally revealed once for all, there could be no growth or change in it.

But let us now look for a little, glancing along the line of historic advance, and see what we really discover; and

then at the end we will try to see, if we may, what are the essential things in Christianity.

And first I wish you to note the growth of belief concerning the nature and the authority of Jesus himself.

"The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." This, of course, was a good many years after the death of Jesus. It was applied to them, undoubtedly, as a nickname, — a name of opprobrium, contempt. A great many of the grandest names of the world have been applied in a similar way, so that we need not be ashamed of it on that account. But what did it mean? What was a Christian, for example, in the time of Paul?

And here let me suggest to you, if you wish to read the New Testament in its order, so as to get the growth of thought, read Paul's epistles first, beginning with Galatians. For these were the first parts of the New Testament, and were written years and years before either of the Gospels came into its present shape.

Now, what was a Christian during the time that Paul was writing these epistles? Only one single thing was necessary to convert a Jew into a Christian. The Jew believed that a Messiah was to come; the Christian believed that the Messiah the Jews had been looking for had come, and that Jesus was he.

That is all that constituted a Christian during the first century, and you will find that it is the burden of Paul's preaching. He went up and down the world proclaiming — what? If you have even a superficial knowledge of the writings of the New Testament, you will recognize the echo of this verse. The one thing that Paul drove home by argument and appeal to the understanding, the consciences, the hearts of his hearers, was that this Jesus who had been crucified was the Christ; and "Christ," you know, is only the Greek "Christos," the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah.

Paul preached, then, that Jesus was the Messiah; and accepting this is what constituted a Christian. But the process of development in regard to the Christian thought about Jesus had only now begun.

And let me ask you to remember, if you think it strange that such a process should have gone on, — remember that Christianity was born in the midst of a time and conditions when it was the commonest thing in the world to deify men. Greek and Roman hero after hero had been deified by the popular imagination and lifted up into the heavens. There was no god in all the Roman Empire so widely worshipped during the reign of Augustus, and for a hundred or two years after his time, as was the Emperor Augustus himself. His image, his shrine, lined all the roads and highways, and was found in the peasants' cottages throughout the Roman Empire.

So then it was not a strange thing among the Greeks and among the Romans that this process of deifying should take place. It was, or would have been, a very strange thing among the Jews. They held such a spiritual conception of God, and regarded him as withdrawn by nature and distance so far from his world, that it would have seemed to them nothing short of outright blasphemy to compare with him any creature born of woman. So that this doctrine never could have sprung up among the Jews. And, as you know, it never found any lodgment among the Jews; the Jews never became Christians.

It grew up among the Greeks and the Romans, where, as I have said to you, this process was one of the commonplaces of the time. But it was not in the first century. First was the thought that he was the Messiah. The next step was the belief that he was the second Adam. You will find Paul teaching this. The first Adam was the head of this fallen humanity of ours. Christ, Paul believed, was divinely appointed to be the head of a new and spiritual

order of humanity that was to supersede the old and carnal order of the past.

Then after that came another step. Jesus came to be regarded as a pre-existent being, the Lord or Master from heaven, the first-born of every creature, — but, remember, creature still, infinitely removed from the divine source of all.

Then at last the final step was taken, and Jesus was elevated to the position of sharing with the Father his own divine nature. But how long did it take for this process to culminate?

As you look back down the ages, facts and movements get massed together in such a way that you do not notice how far they are apart. Just as, for example, if you are standing looking along lengthwise of a row of trees, those trees might be half a mile apart, but they would look to you as if they were close together; so, as you look down the ages toward the beginning of things, events seem to crowd each other, though there were centuries between.

So, as a matter of fact, it was more than three hundred years before the belief in the deity of Jesus became a test of orthodoxy.

If it became necessary, then, to believe in the deity of Jesus in order to be a Christian, in order to be saved, then there were no Christians in the world for three hundred years, and none of the church members of all that time had any chance of being saved. For the doctrine of the deity of Jesus was not promulgated as an orthodox doctrine until the year 325 at the Council of Nice, at the time that the Nicene Creed was formed.

And how was the decision reached at that time? We ought to know some of these primary facts. Was it reached because the people had any new evidence on the subject that they did not have while Jesus was walking in

the fields of Galilee? Was it reached because the people were wiser? Was it built out of evidence?

Nothing of the kind. It was simply the result of philosophical speculation; it was the attempt to bridge over an imaginary gulf supposed to exist between God and his world. And the bishops fought over it not in a very Christian temper. There never was a bitterer factional fight in Tammany Hall than that which finally decided the doctrines of the Nicene Creed; and they were not decided until the Emperor Constantine threw in the weight of his imperial decision against Arius and in favor of Athanasius.

And why did he do it? Did Constantine know anything about it? Was he an example of Christian piety? He was one of the most treacherous, murderous emperors that ever lived. He cared nothing for the principles involved one way or the other; it was simply a matter of governmental policy with him.

Thus the Nicene Creed was born, born after the struggle of three hundred years and more.

Now, as to the other two great creeds of Christendom, let me say a word or two concerning them.

The chancellor of the University of New York, two or three weeks ago, published in one of our great Sunday newspapers the statement that the Apostles' Creed was written eighteen hundred years ago. I do not know whether the chancellor was napping at the time he wrote it. I cannot think that he was ignorant. I cannot think that he would purposely take advantage of the supposed ignorance of his readers. You would suppose, to hear people talk, — there are twelve clauses in the Apostles' Creed, — that the apostles stood up in a row, and one of them recited one clause and another another until they finished the creed, and that it dates back to their time.

As a matter of fact, the Apostles' Creed was never heard

of for five hundred years after the birth of Jesus. Nobody knows who wrote it, or whether there is any authority connected with it or not. We know that the people of that time were very ignorant about this world, and I for one do not know why I should suppose they knew everything about the other. It is a purely anonymous production, of absolutely no authority whatsoever.

If, however, let me say, it be necessary in order to be a Christian that one should accept the Apostles' Creed, then what becomes of the people who lived after the birth of Christ for five hundred years before there was any Apostles' Creed?

Now for the other great Christian symbol, as it is called, — the Athanasian Creed. And let me remind you right here, for it is a matter of a good deal of importance, that the doctrine of the Trinity is not fully developed in either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. It does not come to its last explicit statement until the promulgation of the Athanasian Creed.

I do not know why it should be called the Athanasian Creed. Athanasius lived in the fourth century, and was the great adversary of Arius in the struggle out of which came the Nicene Creed. Yet this creed is named for him. As I say, I do not know why — unless it is supposed that it represents what Athanasius would have believed if he had lived at the time the creed was formed.

This Athanasian Creed has been dropped out of the Prayer Book of the American churches, but it is still binding on every Anglican, and must be subscribed to by all the clergy of the Anglican Church. It is very long, metaphysical, and goes into a particular definition of the Trinity. But when was it promulgated?

Not until the ninth century. More than eight hundred years had gone by in the history of the Church before the Athanasian Creed appeared. And this creed has attached

to it what is called the "damnatory clause," very famous in theological discussion.

What is that clause? It declares that unless a man believe every part of this Athanasian Creed he shall no doubt perish everlastingly.

Again let me ask, if it be absolutely necessary to believe the Athanasian Creed in order to be a Christian, if it be necessary to believe it in order to be saved, what becomes of not only the world for several hundreds of thousands of years, but what becomes of the first eight hundred years of the Christian Church before the Athanasian Creed was heard of?

Such strange claims and such strange alternatives!

Now I want to ask you to note a few facts concerning the real teaching of Jesus and his apostles.

If it be necessary to believe the Athanasian Creed to be a Christian, or the Nicene Creed to be a Christian, or even the Apostles' Creed to be a Christian, then we are fronted with the somewhat startling fact that not one single one of the apostles was a Christian according to any record we have of them; and Jesus himself was not a Christian!

Study if you will, read with a little care, the first three Gospels. I omit the fourth because most competent scholars agree that the fourth Gospel is not so much a life of Jesus as it is a theological treatise. They believe that it was written, not by John, but by some unknown hand somewhere during the first half of the second century. Nobody knows who wrote it, and it carries not the authority of an eye-witness or a hearer at all.

But let me note that even in the Gospel of John there is no teaching of the doctrine of the Trinity. In it — and I have had the text quoted to me hundreds of times as though it settled the question, and that is the reason I quote it now — Jesus is represented as saying, "I and my Father are one." But, unfortunately for the argument, he

is represented as praying in the immediate context that the disciples may be one with him precisely as he is one with the Father.

So, if the first text proves the deity of Jesus, the other one, also reported from the lips of Jesus, proves the deity of all the disciples.

But, as you read the first three Gospels, there is a conspicuous absence of almost every single doctrine that is regarded as essential.

If Jesus, as the second person in the Trinity, came into this world on purpose to save people from the fall, does it not seem a little strange that he does not anywhere make the slightest allusion to it?

Jesus never said anything about the fall of man, or Adam, or Eve, or the serpent, or anything of the kind, — apparently knows nothing about them. He says nothing about the doctrine of the atonement; he says nothing about the Trinity.

There is hardly anything which according to these popular creeds is essential to Christianity which Jesus anywhere touches or appears to care about in any way whatever.

There has been then, I say, this progress, this growth, from generation to generation and from century to century, of what has come to be called Christian belief. And that belief has never been absolutely fixed concerning any one of these great doctrines.

If I had time to enter into a discussion of the doctrine of the atonement, I could show you that concerning it a similar thing is true.

For the first thousand years of Christian history the Church Universal believed in some form that the sufferings and death of Jesus were a price paid to the devil for the redemption of mankind. That is, they believed that by right of conquest Satan had come to be the ruler of mankind, the king of this world. And God agreed with

the devil to let him have, to torture and put to death, his old adversary, the leader of the angels before he was cast out, as the price of the redemption of men. This was the doctrine for a thousand years. God is represented as having cheated or outwitted the devil. The devil supposed he was going to keep Jesus forever. He did not know there was anything divine about his nature; and so, even after he had entered into the bargain, he lost the price on which he had agreed.

I am not caricaturing the doctrine: I am simply stating what was written and preached for a thousand years.

And this doctrine of the atonement has passed through ten or fifteen or twenty transformations since that day.

So in regard to any one of the great doctrines. Instead of there having been an original and clear and defined revelation of divine truth at the first, held throughout the Church the entire length of its history, there has been change from age to age; and there is nothing that all those who wish to call themselves Christians are agreed upon to-day as to what is essential to Christianity. Still, the Greek Church and the Roman Church and the Protestant churches are pitted against one another, and the different denominations of the Protestant churches against one another, and all of them against us Unitarians, who claim the right to be free and accept the results of modern study and investigation.

Now, let us raise the question from the point of view of the modern world as to what is essential in Christianity.

The ceremonies, are they? The cult? Do you know, there is nothing original in the cult? Almost every single one of the ceremonies in the Church are pagan in origin and hundreds of years older than Christianity. For example, the eucharist, holy water, baptism, — all this ceremonial can be traced to Egypt and other parts of the pagan world long before Christianity was heard of.

Is it the doctrines? We have already seen that there is no consensus of opinion in regard to the acceptance of the doctrines. But hardly a single one of the doctrines is original with Christianity.

You find the Trinity in Egypt, in India, all over the antique world. You find the virgin-birth in almost every one of the great pagan religions. A dozen, twenty, twenty-five heroes and demigods have been virgin-born. Almost every one of these doctrines can be paralleled in the history of Buddhism. There is, to-day, in one of the churches in Europe a statue of Isis and Horus, the virgin mother and her child, from ancient Egypt, rechristened, and doing duty for Mary and Jesus.

So little, then, are these doctrines original.

What is it, then, that Christianity brought to the world, which we cling to with passionate love to-day and are not willing to let go?

The great contribution to the world which Christianity has made, which is original, which is unique, which is precious to every loving and tender heart, is the ideal of the life, the character, the spirit, the teaching of the Nazarene; Jesus, his spiritual attitude, his love, his human sympathy, his tenderness, his sacrifice, his willingness to help.

These are the essential things in Christianity, and these alone.

The doctrines as they have been held in the past are all of them destined to pass away. The thing that we cling to in this modern world and are going to cling to more and more is simply the ascertained truth of the universe as fast and far as it can be discovered. This is to be the external form and framework of things; here is the material out of which we are to construct our theological theories, — for theological theories we shall construct in the future as men have constructed them in the past.

But the one thing that grows brighter, and fairer, and sweeter, age after age, is this, — the Christ ideal, that luminous, leading star of human hope and of divine helpfulness. There is nothing to match it in any other religion, nothing so sweet, nothing so fair, nothing so tender.

The spiritual attitude of Jesus seems to me simply perfect. I cannot understand how in any age in the future it can be outgrown. I am not referring to the limited thought of Jesus, — Jesus shared with his age many of the intellectual theories which the world has already outgrown, — I am referring now to his spiritual attitude. Was there ever anything diviner in the history of man than that simple, childlike, perfect trust in the Father? Trust for every day, trust for every night; a trust when he was hungry, a trust when he was lonely and sorrowful; a trust when the great hopes of his life had been dashed and seemed to be passing away.

I think there is nothing so sublime in the history of all the past as that figure of Jesus on the cross that Friday afternoon outside the walls of the city, surrounded by the Roman soldiers and the mob, — he, the gentle teacher, he who loved his friends and who so loved his enemies that, as he was swooning into death, he said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Hanging there with all of his hopes an apparent failure, wondering whether God himself had not forgotten and let go his hand, and yet with a trust that still clung in the darkness and the weakness, so that he fainted through death into immortal triumph. The victory over the thought, the love, the reverence, the worship of mankind, such as has never been won by any other historic figure in all the world! This perfect trust in the Father!

I know of nothing finer than this spiritual attitude of Jesus.

And then that other side of his nature, his relation towards his fellow-men. A service unstinted! Nothing grander was ever said about any man that ever lived than was said about Jesus: "He made himself of no reputation;" he cared nothing for fame or human greatness; "he went about doing good;" he sacrificed time, strength, love, gave himself utterly that he might help one of the least of these his brethren.

I say, then, that the Christianity of the future is to be made up of these two elements: all truth for the theological side, however gained and through whatever source; then the spiritual attitude towards God and towards man of Jesus.

Now if the churches can ever prove that these two are not Christian, then it will be the saddest day that Christianity has ever seen. For they will have proved that there is something in the world that is better than Christianity. For there can be nothing finer than this: — truth for the thought side; the spirit and temper of Jesus for the feeling, the aspiration side.

There can be nothing finer than that, nobler than a combination like that.

Now let us at the end, just one moment, notice the one solemn utterance of Jesus on this subject. If he be correctly reported, he is setting forth for all time what in his judgment are the conditions of entrance into heaven. Here is this solemn scene of judgment, the sheep on his right hand, the goats on his left. He sends one of them into outer darkness, and the other into eternal felicity.

I am not discussing the question of future punishment now; I simply wish you to fix your attention on the conditions of admission to heaven as Jesus sets them forth.

Now, when he speaks to those on his right hand, that he calls the blessed of his Father and who are to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world, what does he say?

Does he catechise them as to what they believed? Not one single syllable of belief in any doctrine whatsoever. Nothing about foreordination; nothing about the Bible; nothing about the Trinity; nothing about his own character or authority. Simply as to whether they have been good. Good, that is all! Have they helped, have they tried to lessen the sum of human misery? Have they cared for their fellow-man? Not a word about ceremony, about membership in a church; not a word about any priesthood; not one single thing that all the churches to-day are declaring to be absolutely essential to Christian character and Christian life, — not one word about any of them!

Those who have tried to be good and help their fellow-men are the ones before whose feet the door of eternal felicity opens with welcome. And the others are condemned, not for lack of belief, but simply for lack of character and conduct, nothing else!

Now, then, let me say here as my final word, according to the standards of the popular churches to-day, not a single one of the apostles was a Christian, and Jesus was not a Christian; and if Jesus should come here to New York in this year 1897, and should go before a board of examiners, petitioning for admission into any one of the churches, there is not a single one that could take him in, provided they asked of him the same questions which they ask other candidates.

And, though they all say that we Unitarians are not Christians, I verily believe that if Jesus were here he would find himself welcome in the midst of our simple service that teaches just what he taught, — the love of God and the service of man as the great essentials of all true religion.

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